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Masks, Vaccination Remain Indispensable Tools in Combating COVID-19

By Mario J. Paredes

August 23, 2021

AMERICANS HAVE A BAD CASE OF PANDEMIC FATIGUE, of wearing masks and getting vaccinated, with many quite livid at the prospect of a third shot, a booster shot to combat the fast-spreading and highly contagious Delta variant of the coronavirus. Many wonder why they should get yet a third vaccine when the first two shots apparently do not adequately protect people from getting infected. There is also a growing chorus of voices, lay and scientific, that insists that vaccination comes with the risk of serious illness—particularly in the young—and that, anyway, vaccinated people, once they end up in the hospital, appear to do not much better than those patients who have not been vaccinated.

The sentiment is understandable, even if the theories are speculative. But there is no doubt that mainstream experts, along with the Centers of Disease Control (CDC), agree across the board: there is a new surge of COVID-19, and the wearing of masks and vaccination are vitally important in meeting this new wave of the pandemic head-on. Even as we investigate and assess the seriousness of threat from the Delta variant, there simply is no alternative to deploying the tools that helped us overcome the first 18 months of the pandemic—masks and vaccination. Together, as research has shown, they have lowered the death rate and the number of hospitalizations.

When it comes to contemplating the dangers inherent in the new surge of the pandemic, there is a collective shrug of indifference in so many quarters, among the general public as well as the scientific community. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that government at the city, state, and federal level, as well the health-care community go all out in launching a communication campaign to hammer down the point: the use of masks and vaccination is indispensable—it provides a barrier to new variants of the various and consolidates the gains made in combating the first wave of COVID-19. In any case, early indications suggest that more people end up hospitalized with the Delta variant in those states that do not enforce a vaccination mandate.

SOMOS Community Care, a network of some 2,500 physicians—most of them primary care doctors—serving one million of the most vulnerable Hispanic, Asian American and African American Medicaid patients in New York City, is playing a key role in protecting hard-to-reach people of color, informing them about the importance of wearing masks and getting vaccinated.

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Earlier this year, the New York State Department of Health authorized SOMOS doctors to begin administering the vaccine at their inner-city, community-based practices. They are in a unique position because of the bond of trust with their patients. That relationship hinges on the providers intimately knowing their patients, thanks in part to the work of Community Health Workers going out into the community and visiting patients' homes. Patients also feel a sense of comfort with their doctors as, in many cases, they share an ethnic and cultural background with them.

This has helped SOMOS physicians—who also spread the word in the schools—become great communicators, a quality harder to come by for large hospital-based health-care conglomerates. But, of course, all medical entities and institutions must do what they can to broadcast the importance of wearing masks and getting vaccinated.

Communication campaigns are not enough. Other forms of persuasion and nudging are in order. In New York, very soon, both staff and customers at restaurants, gyms, and movie theatres, will be required to present proof of vaccination. It appears inevitable that other social services and activities will follow suit, with such measures putting real pressure on the public to get vaccinated—or else forgo the pleasure and privilege of participating in ordinary activities. France has already shown how effective this use of an unfortunately heavier hand of authorities can be.

The public must come to see and embrace how wearing masks, as well as getting vaccinated, is to boost the well-being of their fellow men and women. Pope Francis called getting vaccinated nothing less than “an act of love.”

Happily, it is quite apparent on the streets of New York City that more people are wearing masks again. And coffee shops, stores and other establishments have swapped signs saying vaccinated customers need not wear masks for suggestions that all who enter should wear them.

For now, these are suggestions—but wearing masks could become, along with getting vaccinated, explicit requirements in a growing number of settings. That would be a necessary evil in the face of the surge of COVID-19. The battle is far from over.

Significantly, on August 23rd the Food and Drug Administration granted full approval to the Pfizer-BioNTech's coronavirus vaccine for those 16 and older, the first vaccine to move beyond emergency status in the US.



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The move is expected to trigger vaccine requirements by many hospitals, colleges, corporations, and other organizations. Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III has already mandated that the country's 1.4 million active-duty service members be vaccinated.

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